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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: TRYING TIMES

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter; reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: Nigeria has entered a period of unease. During the past several months, the country's political elite has been more attentive to political intrigue than the demands of responsible governance. As a result, civilian government faces multiple challenges. Communal clashes have engendered a general sense of insecurity and doubts about GON competence. Proposed electoral reform has pitted state governors against national lawmakers and could lead to a constitutional showdown over election scheduling. In the lead up to the PDP national convention, internecine guerilla politics threatened to balkanize the ruling party. It took last minute deal-making to produce an orderly convention that has helped reduce the political heat; yet fissures remain in the ruling party. On the economic front, with unemployment and inflation high, people are looking hard to find their promised democracy dividend. President Obasanjo's critics cast these problems at his feet, claiming his heavy-handed leadership style and inattention to domestic matters have helped spark dry tinder. Many Nigerians have voiced concern about the sustainability of civilian government if the resulting brushfires are not extinguished. It will take sustained effort and political acumen to walk Nigeria out of its current rough patch. Since returning from the U.S., President Obasanjo has demonstrated more attention to internal security in meetings with state governors and local leaders. End summary.

POLITICS WITHOUT PURPOSE

2. (C) As the end of 2001 draws near, Nigeria is significantly more tense than it was a year ago. If forced to render an honest appraisal, the country's political elite would have to blame itself for this diminution of Nigeria's political stock. Competition for position and influence in local, state and federal governments and within the political parties has been destabilizing. Electioneering, with an eye toward the 2003 polls more than eighteen months away, began months ago and consumes the full attention of most politicians. With too many politicians jockeying for position while trying to derail real and perceived opponents, the electoral season has become perpetual and frenetic. The media fuels the competition with a lively but indistinguishable mix of factual and fictional reporting. Not a day passes without front-page reports of the latest Machiavellian intrigue and political deadlock. Relishing this partisan fare, politicians and the media give scant substantive attention to the issues of the day: public security, communal unrest and economic development to improve the lives of the majority of Nigerians, who survive on less than one dollar a day.

3. (C) Instead of travelling a new, higher road under President Obasanjo's expected moral guidance, politics continue to be driven by money, greed, personal connections and the all consuming ascriptive considerations of ethnicity, region and religion. Policy formulation and platforms on issues have become orphaned in the process. Injected with daily doses of this coarse politicking and perceiving no real improvement in their lives, the public is increasingly cynical and government is losing its relevance. The growing perception is that democratization is becoming a misnomer -- that the political process is too top heavy and that incumbents will hijack democratic processes for their own benefit and that of their patrons and proteges.

A GROWING SENSE OF INTERNAL INSECURITY

14. (C) While politicians fiddle, civil disturbances have flared with devastating impact during the past several months. An estimated three thousand are dead in the wake of communal conflicts in Jos and Kano, as well as portions of Kaduna, Nasarawa, Taraba and Benue states. In each instance, the police have been overwhelmed and unable to quash the unrest. The military was summoned to restore order or to help the police to do so. By our count, the military controls internal security or provides significant assistance to the police in parts of 15 of Nigeria's 36 states (The British High Commission's count is 18 states). The deterrent presence of military units in Kaduna may have prevented violence in the state capital when Shari'a criminal law was formally introduced November 2. That Kaduna authorities felt the need for a visible military presence demonstrates the level of tension lurking in many areas of the country. Moreover, troops in Kaduna City did not prevent a gruesome incident (at least ten dead) in the southeast corner of the state.

15. (C) There have been other disturbances with death tolls directly related to partisan politics or political manipulation of ethnic and religious differences in parts of the country. October street battles between rival PDP and APP hoodlums in Zamfara State were bloody. Communal and political flare-ups in Delta state (Warri) and the South East region have cost lives and could easily rekindle. Other areas are simmering and could erupt as well. A bitter struggle between Kwara State Governor Mohammed Lawal and political kingmaker Olusola Saraki exists alongside ethnic muscle-flexing between partisans of the Hausa-Fulani emirate system (established traditional rulers) and the Yoruba in Ilorin. The Yoruba (aspiring traditional rulers), who probably now comprise a majority of the city's population, want an Oba of Ilorin to be installed. The ruling Hausa-Fulani see this as an encroachment. Complicating relations between Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba everywhere is the recent release in Lagos of the OPC's violent street general Ganiyu Adams, whom Northerners blame for the October 2000 Ajegunle riots that left scores of Hausa-Fulani dead in Lagos.

16. (C) The frequency and intensity of the clashes, coupled with the multiple military deployments throughout the country, generate the impression that civilian politicians cannot maintain order without the military's help. In the public mind, the question has turned from whether there will be future communal violence to where and when that violence will occur. Politicians reinforce this sense of insecurity by publicly bickering over the causes of the unrest and assigning blame to their opponents. For instance, Benue Governor Akume has accused former PDP Chairman Gemade of helping to stoke the violence there. Minister of Defense Danjuma, in turn, has reportedly accused Akume of spending state funds to enlist former military personnel in Tiv militia. In turn, Danjuma has been accused of suborning his Jukun brethren in their confrontation with the unpopular Tiv.

17. (C) Some Nigerians are making negative comparisons, stating that previous military governments were more adept at preventing civil disorder than the current Administration. Comparisons with Nigeria's last elected government - the short-circuited Shagari Administration - are making the rounds. While the vast majority of Nigerians prefer democracy and want to avoid a return of the military, they also want a democracy that works. At the very least, civilian government should not be seen as undermining public security and the economy. The growing chorus of those who say their lives were better during the Abacha years should sound a disturbing alarm at Aso Villa. Even if the chorus is misguided and looking backward through rose-colored glasses, perceptions are often more important than objective reality.

ELECTORAL REFORM - COLLISION OR COMPROMISE?

18. (C) The controversy over the proposed electoral law also makes politicians appear so concerned with their own preservation that they cannot adequately guide the ship of state. The reform would extend the tenure of incumbent local governments. This would make local government elections, now slated for April of 2002, contemporaneous with Presidential, National Assembly and Gubernatorial elections scheduled for 2003. This sounds like a simple technical fix. However, such a change could alter political power relationships in the states. If local elections remain in 2002, governors and state assembly members can better influence these elections, laying solid ground work for their 2003 campaigns. On the other hand, the Presidency and national legislators will gain

greater influence at the local level and, thus, over the governors' re-election prospects if local elections are delayed.

9. (C) The constitution is unclear whether the National Assembly can change election dates. Governors have publicly scorned the proposed measure as unconstitutional. National Assembly leaders likewise have chastised governors in their public statements. Meeting in mid-October, speakers of state assemblies agreed to dissolve their local governments in 2002. This would leave a one-year void at the local government level should the proposal become law. Since electoral registers are to be compiled by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), INEC could refuse to provide registers to the state-level commissions that are supposed to run the local government elections. The state-level commissions might compile their own registers and hold elections in defiance of INEC, or the governors might appoint "care-taker" local government councils (that would doubtless be firmly under gubernatorial control).

10. (C) President Obasanjo has met with governors and key federal lawmakers to seek a resolution. While the talks might have succeeded in reducing the public rhetoric, there is no sign of an agreed fix to this problem as of yet. Unless the sides can find compromise, this issue becomes one of constitutional interpretation for the courts. But Nigeria's discredited judiciary lacks adequate moral authority and arbitrating such a high stakes political game would expose the weak court system to intense political heat. If the politicians toss such a highly charged issue into the courts, there will likely be rulings and counter-rulings, injunctions and counter-injunctions as few would be willing to accept a ruling adverse to their interests. Similar antics in the past have led to such confusion that the entire political process bogged down. Nigeria's elected politicians know this, but they seem intent to seek to maximize their personal advantage with little regard for the effect their pursuits have on the overall system.

PDP - PUTTING THE TEMPEST BACK IN THE TEAPOT

11. (C) Obasanjo's desire to eject PDP national chairman Gemade (his hand-picked and expensively-purchased candidate in 1999) and countless, unseemly turf battles at the local level have undermined the credibility of the ruling party and further whittled an already waning internal cohesion. As the party held local and state congresses, in preparation for the National Convention, competition turned white hot. Allegations of cheating and intimidation were common. In some states, rival factions held separate congresses, picking competing slates of delegates for the National Convention. Trying to postpone the National Convention that would have ousted Gemade from party leadership, pro-Gemade PDP officials filed suit for an injunction. Rumor has it that Gemade paid the judge to issue the injunction. Rumor also has it that Obasanjo ordered that the same judge be paid even more to lift the order.

12. (C) After several late night sessions of party leaders, including the President, Gemade relinquished his claim to the Chairmanship, reportedly in exchange for a fistful of Naira and a promised Cabinet position. Gemade's deal paved the way for creation of a slate of unopposed candidates for all key national party positions. This slate was selected by acclamation at the November 9 convention. What had the makings of a genuine donnybrook turned into a Nigerian-styled garden party due to eleventh hour deal making and movement of money. Despite its flaws, that the convention did not denigrate into an untidy affair has helped reduce overall political tensions. However, the party is sorely divided in several states and the grumbling has not subsided completely. Many people are dissatisfied with the undemocratic manner in which the national officials were selected and presented as a fait accompli to the convention delegates. Moreover, the continuous running to the courts and crying in the press to resolve what were essentially political disputes left a sour taste in the public's mouth which the contrived sweetness of the convention could not remove. People see the PDP ructions not as a principled fight but as a contest to see who wrests control over the party for personal reasons that have little to do with bringing democracy or better leadership to the electorate.

13. (C) While political competition has been in overdrive, the government's stewardship of the economy has been focused on short-term fixes to long-term problems. The maxim that civilian government runs an economy better than the military has not provided much comfort thus far. The Presidency micro-manages economic policy, with either Obasanjo or Vice President Abubakar making decisions even on routine matters. At the local, state and national levels, most officials are seen as venally dipping their hands into governmental coffers. Unemployment remains high; manufacturing productivity remains low. The national government has said the right things but shown little ability to actually implement policies that would spur direct investment and create jobs. Due primarily to budgetary indiscipline and failure to rationalize exchange rates, the government missed important targets in the IMF Stand-By-Agreement (SBA), which has now expired. Fortunately, the government is negotiating an informal agreement with the IMF which, if successful, may result in a new SBA down the line. However, due to the SBA expiry, Nigeria no longer meets Paris Club terms and will have to renegotiate debt repayment with its creditors.

14. (C) On a positive note, privatization has gone fairly well. Complex transactions like NITEL, though behind schedule, have moved faster than most experts anticipated. The bidding to privatize NITEL was successful and generated significantly more revenue than expected. A bumper agricultural crop and higher than expected oil revenues this year will partially moderate negative perceptions of the government's economic performance. However, economic strains may be more pronounced in 2002. Following the slump in oil prices, oil revenue likely will fall; Nigeria also cannot completely insulate itself from the overall global downturn. Meanwhile, there will be political pressure to engage in deficit spending as elections approach.

OBASANJO -- THE MAN IN THE MUDDLE

15. (C) Many critics blame President Obasanjo for the tense state of affairs. They lambaste him for assuming the image of an international statesman while neglecting pressing matters at home. Also, they claim that he has been unprepared to engage in the dialogue and give-and-take necessary for democratic politics to take hold. Many observers expected Obasanjo to expend significant effort developing a political culture and the "informal constitution" key to ensuring that the relationships between the executive and the legislature and between the national and state governments are cooperative and do not fall below a certain level of propriety. Instead, Obasanjo has been described as too eager to choke dissent and differing opinions. He has meddled in the internal affairs of the National Assembly and tried to make the PDP and the National Assembly subservient to Executive will. He has also tried to undermine governors who have shown too much independence or who displeased him. What should be accomplished by dialogue, Obasanjo often attempts by edict, his detractors' claim. In short, he has alienated many previous supporters while garnering few new adherents; yet, many of his past supporters recognize there are currently few viable alternatives to Obasanjo's leadership.

16. (C) Some of this criticism of Obasanjo comes from the sour grapes of people disappointed that Obasanjo has not given them the benefits or access they expected, or has not been as malleable as they thought he would be when elected two years ago. However, much of the criticism is justified. Obasanjo's coarse performance might not be so pronounced had the National Assembly or governors compensated with good leadership at their respective levels. Unfortunately, too many lawmakers and local executives have been masters at enriching themselves while novices at governing. Consequently, their failures have only served to aggravate the impact of the President's lack of political skills.

17. (C) Recently, Obasanjo has taken a few tentative steps toward defusing political tension. On October 31, he formally inaugurated a national security panel. The panel's mandate is to examine the underlying causes of communal violence and develop recommendations to prevent further outbreaks. If the panel is active and not another ad hoc creation that does not function well or produces a report that gathers dust, Obasanjo may recoup lost points. He also has met with the Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba state governors and traditional rulers of the three states to defuse the

Tiv/Jukun violence in the area. The President held a November 11 meeting with all 36 governors to discuss internal security. These moves indicate recognition by the Presidency that internal security must receive high priority. The meetings may also help narrow the political distance between the President and some governors while also showing average Nigerians that he is becoming engaged on an issue that means a lot to them. However, the measure of success will not be in the number of meetings held but in re-establishing a general sense of public security. Given the complexity of many of these localized disputes, reaching the objective will take sustained attention and political will.

PROSPECTS

118. (C) Civilian politicians, in general, and Obasanjo, in particular, have managed to steer the country into the roiled waters between shore and shoal. Insecurity is a pervasive sentiment. Ethnic, religious and regional tensions are more pronounced than at the beginning of the year. Much of the goodwill Obasanjo enjoyed at the outset of his mandate has been expended, often with few positive results to show. Hard decisions that might inflict pain but are needed to jump-start the economy will be increasingly difficult to take as elections draw nearer. Every group feels it is on the wrong end of the political give- and-take, and zero sum politics are omnipresent. This sense of insecurity and loss has also produced an unfortunate strain of selective amnesia -- some people are starting to remember the days of military rule as days of stability and order, rather than long years of repression and suffering.

119. (C) Meanwhile, civilian politicians are so concerned about maintaining themselves in office that they seem not to give appropriate weight to the public's lack of confidence in their collective performance. They risk creating the impression that civilian government is the sole reserve of the elite rather than the only system of governance capable of arbitrating competing demands in a diverse society without resort to repression. The political class could enhance its stock by finding reasonable solutions to the electoral law squabble and by softening the many jagged edges of party politics. More importantly, government at all levels -- but most especially the federal government - needs to be seen as getting a better handle on security issues. Prudent economic management would also take the sting out of some anti-government criticism. If politicians do not show a degree of statesmanship in these areas, next year promises to prove more challenging than this one has turned out to be.
Jeter